

Sympathy for the Devil: Julian Stallabrass interviews Silvia Kolbowski

Lalit Kala Contemporary 54, 2012

Art historian Julian Stallabrass and Artist Silvia Kolbowski discuss Kolbowski's 2010 video project, A few howls again? This video projection resurrects German journalist and political militant, Ulrike Meinhof (1934-1976) in a stop-motion photo animation video loop with titles. Commissioned by Taipei Biennial, 2010

Those who hold positions of power and condemn stone-throwing and arson but say nothing about the bombs in Vietnam, or the terror in Persia, or the torture in South Africa, are hypocritical proponents of nonviolence.

From Protest to Resistance, 1968

Ulrike Meinhof

A Few Howls Again?, Silvia Kolbowski, 2010. Video; 10 mins. Video still.

JS: *A Few Howls Again* is a really remarkable piece, which does many things: but one of the most striking of them is to allow the viewer, if they are open to the work, to put themselves into the mind of someone who was a terrorist, and to think: she wasn't crazy, she wasn't cold, she wasn't deluded—she was in fact intelligent, perceptive, feeling and acted for reasons you could at least have a rational argument about. Ulrike Meinhof's own statements, which appear alongside her image in the silent video, point the viewer towards such thoughts; and the other statements about her in the video, by various pundits, seem over-keen to put her safely into some pathological box. It's very dangerous, especially these days, to imply that violence may be justified (unless it is the violence of the state). How have people reacted?

SK: How do artists get a sense of reactions to their work? I am sometimes lucky enough to engage in discussions with spectators because I both exhibit my work and also screen it at events accompanied by discussion. This work was also shown on Argentine public television, and that generated email responses that the producer sent on to me. In addition, critical writing on this work has started, or professors assign the work to classes, and feedback filters back. I have gotten quite a few emails about this work, from people I know and from strangers.

The words most often communicated to me to describe the video are haunting, provocative, necessary. Often people have a visceral reaction to the technical format of the video. They seem to find frightening the jerky stop-motion photo-animation, because the dead are not supposed to speak. But I think the fright is

produced by the form in combination with the partially told story of Meinhof's 1970s militancy and the inclusion at the beginning of the video of excerpts from her journalistic writings leading up to it. My sense is that this produces fright because the writings – her political critiques – are uncannily relevant to the present, although written in the 1960s. That compression of time can feel unreal and disorienting.

Although the individual and critical responses have certainly risen to the challenges posed by the work, I have not had much institutional response in the U.S. Its only screening here was by an independent curator who screened it one night along with Meinhof's own film "Bambule." The turnout was large and included many young people. I was contacted a while back by a film and video curator in Toronto who subsequently exhibited the video in an exhibition context related to a film festival, under the thematic of "1970s militancy." To be honest, I cannot imagine a U.S. curator engaging such a theme, post-9/11. So a particular group who should see it – those who are profoundly uncomfortable with discussing the questions of violence that the video raises – may not.

JS: There are, of course, many things that they have not been permitted to see—or have chosen not to see—in the conflicts that they have waged since 9/11. I have seen the work a couple of times now: the first time in the Taipei Biennial of 2010, where it occupied the end room of a wing of works, some of them quite noisy and attention-seeking. In that context, the work's silence and coldness—the icy blue of the background, the imagined cold of the morgue—was all the more striking. The second time was in a seminar setting at my college, the Courtauld Institute, where it did generate considerable debate. The experiences were quite different, especially because in the Taipei Contemporary Art Museum, I happened to see the work alone.

This leads me to wonder how you think the educative and dialogic elements of the work and its stark and restrained formal qualities relate. Is the fact that the work is often seen in places where public discussion will follow its showing to an extent forced on you by the careful handling needed of the subject, or was it envisaged from the start? I am thinking, for example, of the work of a British photographic artist, Jo Spence, who made work about some very difficult subjects, including her own treatment for cancer, and who tailored her work for discussion among socialist and feminist activists.

SK: I was so upset by the noise surrounding the work that I left before the opening of that exhibition. So I'm glad to hear that for you it provided more of a contrast than a distraction. Curators are really up against it these days in terms of trying to accommodate the installation requirements of a large number of works in museum spaces that were never designed for that purpose, and invariably with inadequate budgets.

My desire to show works in screenings accompanied by discussions developed over the past decade or so in the general course of being asked to give lectures on my work. This is pretty typical for artists. But I noticed that it started to feel like an essential part of my practice. Firstly, it is profoundly pleasurable to engage in immediate discussion, to experience the affective reaction of an audience, to have the sense that the work is taken seriously as an engagement with social critique. It's not that I'm not sometimes challenged on the work; it's not all praise, by any means. But it provides a sustaining connection and reinforcement of purpose in a field that is difficult to navigate, and even more difficult if one engages uncomfortable subjects. I'm sure the Meinhof video will continue to encounter self-censorship in museums and galleries, but I've always been supported by historians and critics, and their classrooms have become places where the work develops an extended life. And yet I would say that in spite of the support I've received from the academy, there is no pedagogical intent in my work, no didactic goals. My work is a presentation of my identification with particular subjects. In the case of Meinhof, I am a person leading a fairly typical middle-class life (except for my left politics!) who feels a strong identification with a woman who took up arms for political reasons. I do not subscribe to violent political resistance, and would not engage in it. Nevertheless, my identification with Meinhof's violent resistance is what I send out to spectators.

JS: We all learn from dialogue hopefully, and when your work allows people to talk, feel and think in ways that are unfamiliar to them (sympathy for the devil, in this case), then in a quite informal manner you teach and are taught. It's wonderful that so many colleges let you do this. There are forces that would bind academics to instrumental, measurable outcomes just as curators are held to those criteria that register in a

market survey. Learning happens when you reach a place through dialogue that you didn't know you were

going to reach at the start. Meinhof teaches too, from the grave, through the statements that you reproduce in the work, when coupled with the spectacle of her reanimated corpse and the accounts of her prolonged torture in prison. Her pain and her death give added force to her aphorisms, which in any case, like lightning, flash across otherwise dark landscapes of oppression.

But don't we have an inkling of what Meinhof would have made of your identification? In her essay 'Napalm and Pudding', she writes about members of a commune who threw puddings at President Johnson's Vice-President, Hubert Humphrey, on his visit to Berlin in 1967. She skewers the mainstream press who complain that it is rude to throw puddings at politicians but imply that it is fine to host people who are implicated in mass slaughter. The commune members are criticized, too, for not using their interviews with the press to highlight the situation in Vietnam—instead they talked about themselves. One of Meinhof's last essays before going underground, 'Columnism', criticized her own celebrity, and that of columnists in general who perform unorthodox thinking under the limited freedom granted to them by an editor. They act as a 'pressure release valve', she argues. She also says that while the form of the column is free of the editor's authority, it is itself authoritarian.

The art world is deeply and constitutionally individualist, and in this quality is arguably bourgeois to the bone. You are free to talk about your identification with Meinhof because those who are interested in art are sure that it matters. But how do we reconcile this with left-wing thinking, and with the use of left-wing material in art works that lean upon the authority of their singular maker?

SK: All liberal capitalist democracies are to some extent or another dependent on the cruel myth that any individual with a strong enough will can outwit capitalism's zero-sum game. But in regards to art that is critical of the right-wing ideologies that exploit such myths, the proof is in the pudding. There are art works by individual artists that challenge the ideologies inherent to sustaining the myths of liberal capitalist democracies. And there are works by artist collectives that unwittingly support the foundations of those ideologies. The current art world fetishization of art collectives does not always discern the difference. It's interesting that quite a few of the artists who work in collectives also work independently, and establish their art names as individuals in any case. I have also worked in non-art political collectives that have very valuable social aims, but within which the power and ego struggles are demoralizing and undermining. I engage in both modalities, without romanticizing either one.

It's pretty obvious that Meinhof began to see the world in polarized terms before she went underground. I can understand why the political situation in which she lived would have led her to that. But because identification is never complete, because identification is always complex and partial, this is not the part of her or her work with which I identify. I see her point with regard to columns functioning as pressure release valves. But I am also very grateful that she wrote them, because even now they are illuminating, as you so well point out.

The fact that there is any audience at all that is interested in my identification with Meinhof is not due to a ready-made art audience to whom my psychical life as an individual artist matters. It is due to a rare willingness – even today -- to accord authority to a woman with radical political views, made public.

JS: Yes, her view certainly became polarized. It is an often-used but beautifully accurate way of thinking about such political consciousness: as if the ideological orientation of the way most people see the world is turned on its side. The same things are seen, but through a completely different orientation. There were many polarizing agents working on Meinhof—the repression of the West German state, the suppression of women and children, but above all perhaps the unbearable genocide in Vietnam: a prolonged mass-slaughter carried out, in some ways, publicly, openly, to send a political message. Following the Waco massacre of the Branch Davidians by government agents, the comedian Bill Hicks had this to say:

They burned these people alive because the message they want to convey to you is: state power will always win [...] we'll say any lie we want over our propaganda machine, the mainstream media, and we'll burn you and your children in your fucking homes. So you just be apathetic America, you stay docile, and don't you

ever forget: you're free to do what we tell you.

For a child of the war, whose nation had committed a genocide, which was still at the time of her activism, largely suppressed in German memory; and who had also experienced the horrors of mass bombing, another matter not much talked about, that spectacle—of genocide by bombardment—must have been truly unbearable. Or rather the question is: how was it that for so many who shared her experiences, it was somehow bearable?

Bush fought another open war to which the media were invited to see a demonstration of state power. It didn't work out quite as he and the proselytizers of the Revolution in Military Affairs had planned. The current President is no less bellicose and extremist but is more secretive. Mass murder continues, delivered from the air, but there are hardly any pictures. Or the pictures that do emerge come by routes so circuitous that they are hard to 'verify'. And without pictures, political reaction seems muted. Does any of this resonate in the work? And do you think Meinhof, as you see her, understood invisible as well as visible violence?

SK: That is an interesting way to analyze polarization. It reminds me of a provocative statement by the U.S. environmentalist Derrick Jensen, who believes that if space aliens arrived on earth and systematically deforested the planet, removed 90% of fish from the oceans, and changed our climate, humans would respond with violent self-defense. But the human psyche has a capacity for denial that makes rational assessment of runaway corporate capitalism difficult, particularly because it is still considered shameful to talk about the psyche in regards to politics.

I agree that political reaction is muted because digitized warfare does not document itself. But that may not be the only reason. The psyche can rationalize even violent imagery or events if there is an investment in the ideology of an outcome. Regard for the other is not automatic, and it can be all too easily blocked. And there is the dynamic of projection. If puritanical American capitalism makes people feel individually responsible for its failings and their suffering, then the resulting shame and self-blame can be aggressively projected outward. Reactionary governments capitalize on such dynamics. Meinhof was sensitive to invisible violence - in her critiques of the everyday but unremarked exploitation that women suffered, as you point out, but also in her warnings about the naturalization of state-justified violence.

But what of art in regards to violence? After that one-night screening in New York, a young woman commented that it was important for art to represent violence today. I agree, because ever since 9/11 we have faced endless political manipulation in regards to understanding violence in the world. What can art do that other forms of critique cannot? And are there risks when art represents violence? Human beings have aggressive drives that need to be recognized in order to be sublimated, re-directed into other kinds of actions. This is something that art needs to acknowledge. Art creates identification through representational points of view –discursive ones, but also visual and aural ones -- through camera work, framing, pacing, signs of authorship, the ensemble that makes an artwork. This makes it a rich field for representing the complex relationships of humans to violence. But there is also a responsibility attached to making an artwork about violence. Like all forms of representation, but perhaps more subtly, art is capable of multiple effects. It can depict the tragedy of violence and at the same time create an experience of thrill for the spectator. The impact of the codes of masculinity and femininity attached to a work – of the subject, of the artist - should not be underestimated. If “A few howls again?” can enter a larger discourse about violence, it would be the best reason for reawakening Meinhof.

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